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ABSTRACT

The advocacy and establishment of legislation for minimum competency tests appears to be based upon the desire to hold educators responsible for their products, to measure the cost effectiveness of education, and to insure that all students obtain an adequate education in basic skills; but it is argued that using minimum competency standards has none of these effects. Instead, it will keep property taxes down, keep test-makers at work, and secure privileges and prerogatives for those in educational research and administration. Additionally, a highly motivated segment of the work force will find reduced employment opportunities. It is also contended that setting minimum competency standards is largely a political act, which involves the use of public authority to further the interests of private groups. Minimum competency testing is characterized as typical twentieth-century American politics, whereby certain groups gain advantages at the expense of individuals. It is concluded that the benefits to many students are questionable. (Author/CTM)

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The Politics of Proficiency

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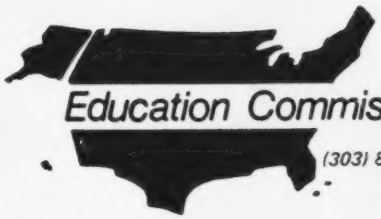

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THE POLITICS OF PROFICIENCY

Introduction

At both state and national levels educators and politicians have articulated a desire to establish minimum acceptable standards of competency at various ages or grade levels (for high school graduates in particular).[1] As of May, 1977, sixteen states had begun programs measuring the extent to which students meet minimum standards of proficiency in various subject matters.[2] The advocacy and establishment of such legislation appears to be based upon the desire to hold educators responsible for their products, to measure the cost-effectiveness of education per se, and to insure that all students obtain an adequate education in basic skills. We will argue that the use of minimum standards of competency have none of these effects. Instead, it will keep property taxes down, keep test-makers at work, and secure privileges and prerogatives for those in educational research and administration. Additionally, a highly motivated segment of the work force will find reduced employment opportunities.

Here we will attempt to explain why such standards come to the fore now, the forms in which they will be likely to appear, and their likely effects on children, education, parents, various professions and businesses, and the arenas of politics. We will contend that the setting of minimum acceptable standards of literacy or of other academic skills is largely a political act - and that many of the causes and consequences of standards are political as well. The politics is the use of public authority to further the interests of private groups ranging from middle class taxpayers and businesses to professional teachers and test producers. If organized and already advantaged

groups did not benefit from the establishment of minimal standards, they would not come about.[3] The politics of standard setting is no different from any other politics: some groups will be advantaged; some will be able to prevent harm or hazard to themselves; and few, typically those who have not formed into organized groups, will be harmed.

Many of the groups potentially involved in standard setting are directly political: the Congress, Office of Education, etc. Many others are organized, public employees, principally teachers and administrators. Some are private groups whose professional and/or political clout involves various concessions granted in public law.[4] These groups do not voluntarily give up their prerogatives. Similarly neither public nor even private bureaucracies voluntarily close shop or even diminish their level of activity. Remember the March of Dimes! Hence the use of minimal standards will take a form that is not threatening to already established professional prerogatives and bureaucratic structures.

All those groups and political actors involved in the development of competency-based standards can claim to be acting in the public interest.[5] Better education and more accountability are always good things. But will what is actually proposed and carried out in the name of accountability hold anyone other than poor students accountable? Will education for anyone for anything be improved? Whatever the answers, the paths toward accountability and the establishment of competency requirements will be those suggested by already organized professions and other groups. This is because such groups have political standing: they have access to political institutions and understand their mechanics.[6] Within these institutions, these groups can impose costs on others who foment adverse activity or legislation and can provide benefits of free information

and/or service to cooperating groups or political actors. On the other hand, those who are not organized cannot do this at all. New groups cannot be expected to form around the issue of accountability. It is in almost nobody's interest or capacity to gather the necessary information and expend the necessary time and other resources to organize totally new groups for this purpose. Already organized groups can shift or add to their activities (March of Dimes, the political activity of AFL-CIO) and some will become involved in the politics of accountability.[7] In consequence, this politics will be like that surrounding almost any other issue and will involve some subset of already established groups.

The educational and testing activity associated with proficiency standards is usually seen as a cost-benefit sort of undertaking. In part it is, but to concentrate on total costs and benefits will mask the political process that is involved in standard setting, and will lead to mistaken predictions and recommendations as to the eventual character of such standards. The politics of standard setting is not determined by totals of costs and benefits. What is important to know is: whose costs and whose benefits.

We will argue that standard setting is not simply a program developed by educational professionals to improve the education of children and accountability in general. Rather, it is a response to particular political and fiscal stimuli. High real property and personal income tax levels for some groups and the problems some middle class kids have reading and getting into professional schools lie behind the cry for accountability. The latter problem is really that the middle classes cannot use the public schools for the purposes to which they are accustomed. Public schools, as a channel of

mobility to professional training, are denied to poor achievers now more than to the poor *per se*.

The problem with American schools is not that fewer Americans can read as well as fifty years ago, or even that many people cannot read well enough to perform the many mechanical tasks in our economy. Instead, the problem may be that the meritocracy is working and more middle class children are excluded from the rewards of advanced education.

The competency standards that emerge from this problem appear to satisfy everybodies' needs. Professions will be enhanced insofar as legitimacy is given to increased professional specialization. This is particularly important for educational professionals (not so much classroom teachers) who maintain a monopoly on much information, but have cornered almost no useful skill. At the same time, taxes will *appear* not to increase; hence the middle class taxpayer is satisfied. Test producers are employed. Indeed it seems all benefits and no costs.

Not so! School dropouts could increase by half and a portion of those currently finishing high school could have their chances at finding any reasonable job reduced to close to zero. Again the poor, the unorganized, some minorites, are the likely losers. This will be true even if additional, remedial programs are developed to deal with those who do not pass the standard.

Apparent and Real Reasons for Proficiency Standards

Dissatisfaction with products of systems of primary and secondary education is not new. Increasingly, however, our political and legal systems have developed forums in which these complaints could be dealt with. Certainly there has been political and legal response to claims that Black and inner city children are receiving an inferior

education. Now the middle classes are using politics and the courts to redress grievances about public education. Peter Doe cases are a new phenomenon. This is due to changes in the use of our legal system and the use of education a business meritocracy, not to increasing illiteracy of middle class children. There is simply no evidence that more or a higher percentage of middle and upper middle class kids are illiterate now than, say, twenty years ago. Indeed, the upward shifting norms of both I.Q. and lower-grade achievement tests since the first World War suggests that the average kid age nine today is the intellectual peer of the average kid about age eleven then. What, then, is different?

The differences are two: 1. In spite of some slippage, access to employment and income possibilities depends more and more on a meritocratic system. Such a system measures people, in part, by years of completed schooling and certificates in hand. The information costs of such a screening system to employers is low. Business and commerce generally are supportive of a highly differentiated output from public and private education, just as years ago they favored vocational education when semi-skilled employees were in greater demand.[8] Both educators and business, then, support the use of education as a screening device, the consequence of which is to more frequently position people in jobs as a consequence of their relative success in formal education. There are progressively fewer ways in which the children of the wealthy, the successful, and the professionals can bypass the educational network, and obtain economic success.
2. It is no longer the wealthy who are the beneficiaries of any slippage around the educational network. Minorities are now the prominent beneficiaries. Some of the slippage has even been brought into colleges and professional schools under the headings "reserved

spaces", some forms of "affirmative action", and "a culturally diverse student body."

The net effect is that, if the children of the well off, the organized, and the successful cannot negotiate school, they have little hope of inheriting their parents' standing in society. Whether kids care about this or not, many parents do. For the first time in American society we are almost effectively preventing most parents from successfully bequeathing income flow and potential social standing to the next generation. Clearly those most affected by this have access to the political arena and to the resources to enjoin law suits. In a meritocracized society with little slippage around test scores, parents have few options other than to challenge the adequacy of the educational system if their children perform poorly.

Hence not only the parents of children who can't read are concerned with public education. Parents of children who cannot read or reason well enough to test into high status graduate and professional schools are challenging the adequacy of American education. For many, the Scholastic Aptitude Test score decline of 49 points (from 1963 to 1977 verbal) is seen as warrant for the claim that schools are generally failing to teach kids. However, the use of this evidence to claim that basic skills are not taught adequately and, hence, we must introduce minimum standards is wrong. SAT's do not measure basic skills. If you can even read the directions for taking the machine-scored SAT's, you are literate enough to perform almost all the non-professional roles in our economic system.

However, the SAT score decline does represent a decline in something measurable and has become a salient rallying point, particularly for "overtaxed" middle class parents of underachieving

children. They argue that our kids must be less educated in 1977 than in 1963 and it must be predominantly the fault of the school.

Such a conclusion misses the point with regard to the establishment of minimum standards. Average SAT score decline has nothing to do with minimum standards using competency based testing. As stated SAT'S do not measure basic competencies of any known sort; even if test scores were related to basic skills in some unimaginable way, we could draw no consequences about the attainment of minimum levels of competencies from the analysis of averages. The use of such averages is also not relevant to the complaints of parents whose children do not get into graduate or professional schools. Since the SAT is a norm referenced test within year cohorts, it is unclear that the rank ordering of test results would be mush affected by the level of the scores compared to other years. Were everybody to do better, most of the same children would still be denied further educational opportunity of their choosing. To shift the rank ordering in a beneficial manner, a parent would have to argue for a better education for his/her child and for denying the same improvement to some others.[9]

Anyway, factors that cause declines in SAT averages include many that have little to do with the content of curriculum or anything else about the school. The Wirtz report for the Educational Testing Service suggests that changing composition of population taking the SAT is probably associated with 3/4's of the decline in the average score. The report includes a literal grabbag of other possible causes of score decline.[10] Some of these relate to what happens in schools. However schools tend to offer what parents and politics will support. Over the past 15-20 years there has been less parental

and public support for the competitive class room. We would not deny the resulting trend toward increased permissiveness and grade inflation over this period. Additionally, pressures for equal opportunity, where this is measured by equality of output has tended to homogenize the process of passing through the educational system. In earlier grades, students sometimes pass on regardless of what they have learned.

In any event, such test score decline is not at the root of the impetus for minimum proficiency standards. Money is. Money and false expectations generated by politics of the great society.

When ESEA was passed in 1965, many people anticipated that the money generously provided would solve educational problems in the same way that money was to solve the problems of equal employment opportunity, inadequate housing, malnutrition, and most of our other social ills. To many people, then, any evaluation of ESEA, Title One in particular, was to be in terms of educational accomplishments. What did the money bring in terms of increased achievement test or I.Q. scores? This posture was readily seized upon by educational professionals and professionalized government research contractors. Evaluation was needed and the dependent variable could be scored and/or counted. Upon investigation almost no benefits were found for the additional money sunk into education.[11]

Whether or not there are real achievement benefits from Title One, academics and commercial researchers missed the point. In the eyes of the Congress, only one purpose of Title One was to affect the test scores of the poor.[12] Even lacking the latter, Title One is secure as a funded program, because it does redistribute money to poorer areas, support an extensive set of bureaucratic and educational

professionals, and is usable as geographically divisible benefit that can be attributed to almost every incumbent in Congress for electoral purposes.

Whether or not Title One and other such programs are of no educational value in a narrow sense they would continue. There are too many benefits for politicians, educational professionals and large, public bureaucracies for such a program to be dropped. However such a program costs money and does not visibly benefit middle class tax payers. Hence, to many such taxpayers, it represents waste. Additionally local property taxes seem to keep going up.

The Federal tax rate is effectively progressive on average only up to an income of about $40,000 or $50,000. Many Americans fall into the 15,000 to 50,000 dollar income bracket and a sizeable proportion of them are property owners. Property taxes pay local school levies. (When all income, social security, property and sales taxes are considered.) Middle-class property owners have paid an ever increasing percentage of each dollar earned for taxes. Certainly there is resistance to apparently ever increasing taxation, taxation which takes more and more of every additional dollar earned.

Why education? Why do not middle-class taxpayers respond similarly to the clearly inefficient system of local-state-national welfare, public housing and rent controls, or the woeful redistributions to professionals in medicare and medicaid. The latter is less objectionable because it redistributes from the middle-classes back - very much - to the middle-classes; middle-class tax-dollars are paid for services provided by middle-class professionals. The guild-like prerogatives of doctors and hospital administrators are not threatened. Taxing is separated from spending within the large bureaucratic

labyrinth of the Federal government. Further, anyone might need medicare when older. Public housing funnels money to the construction industry; rent control is temporary and/or subject to modification under political pressure. Further, its beneficiaries are themselves often organized - e.g. labor union members. In the cases of medicine and housing, then, there is not compelling pressure only on the side of undoing the programs. Organized middle-class groups are also beneficiaries.

Welfare is a predominantly national program involving Federal taxation and state expenditures. The perceived connection between welfare and income tax levels is somewhat tenuous, because so many other activities are also funded out of this revenue. However education is viewed as a local good, even if some of the money comes from the taxing and spending mechanisms of state and Federal govenments. Middle-class individuals readily see the process of local education in the schools they walk by on their way to work. Further, half of all of what a <u>small</u> area or district spends on education is raised within exactly the same area through local property taxes. There is a directly visible tie between taxing and spending in a small area when the tax district is the same as the benefit district.

Politicians have long since known that when additional spending is desirable, one must avoid the geographical identity of small taxing and spending districts. The greater the equivalence of these districts, the less is spent. The smaller the area of equivalence, or overlap, the less is spent. Indeed, we must use moral suasion at the local level to spend at the level we do for education. Such suasion is not necessary for Federally funded welfare even though welfare would seem to be no more of a morality engaging issue than

is education. Taxing for welfare is largely federal; most spending is state and local. Little financial control rests in a local area alone.

The revolt of the middle-class taxpayers begins with what they can see and feel they can control: education. This reaction takes the form of questions and doubts, initially vaguely posed: what are we getting for our money? Shouldn't we have property tax relief? etc. These questions must be taken seriously, because those who ask them are or can be more politically efficacious than many others in our society. In other forums, as doctors, lawyers, business people, etc., they are already efficacious.

The movement from a concern for the outcomes of formal education and middle-income tax revolt to something like proficiency standards in public education is conditioned by two factors - the cost accounting basis of much of American business life and the fact that the response is conditioned by professionals in the area of education. We do not see the wholesale dismissal of teachers or hear cries that too many people teach remedial reading and too poorly. Nor is it suggested that we should rid ourselves of some of the research and some of the researchers in education even though they have produced so little of value. Instead we all agree that we must be concerned with the costs and benefits of education. Lets see what we get for our dollar, particularly since we are not going to spend dollars at a higher rate. Let's try to measure the product. Let's see who reads and who does not. Of course the people who will do all this are the professional researchers and administrators of the educational system. What we have is a menu to remedy vaguely but strongly felt ills prepared by those who ought to be among the groups suspected

of bringing such ills. Let's call it agenda setting. Two parts of the agenda prepared by professional educators are clear. Administrators and particularly researchers will shift activities, to those apparently responsive to public outcry. An example is research on criterion referenced testing. Almost no administrator or researcher ("teachers of teachers") will go without work, although some teachers of students may be dropped because of declining enrolment or budgetary constraints. Additionally, as we will show, tests of minimum standards and competency based testing in general will only succeed in evaluating individual students; teachers, administrators and researchers will remain immune to evaluation. All we will know about educational failure will be about kids who fail a test.

Scope, Construction, and Use of Competency Based Tests

The pressures and considerations that foment the cry for standards are likely to draw public response: response from politicians who see votes; from professionals who wish to preserve prerogatives or see new activities which would fall within their domain; and from public bureaucracies like the Office of Education and N.I.E. trying to maintain and expand their missions. Further, there is likely to be a Federal response. The cost of Federal activity in this area is masked in the somewhat unchanging tax laws as they affect the individual. Few people would say that they are paying more Federal taxes because the government responds to their concerns with a small program.

Indeed, if there is to be pressure for the use of competency

based testing in schools, a Federal role is clearly desirable, if only from the perspective of efficiency. At present there are pressures in a multitude of states for the development of standards, particularly for high school graduation. Some states are using or developing tests of all kinds toward this end.[14] If tests were developed at the Federal level one would achieve possibly large economies of scale and the advantages of standardization and comparability across states. To do this, states must collectively decide at what level or age and in what subjects competency based tests should be given. From a national perspective three age-levels seem salient: age 7 or second grade, because children can now use written media; age 11 or grade six, because at this age there is proportionally the largest school population; age 17-18 or twelfth grade, because one receives a credential and there is the possibility of entrance into further education.

If the Federal level funds test development, and tests are produced and offered to states, what are they to be used for? A test without a use might as well not be given. At the twelfth grade level, a demonstrated competency at reading might be a necessary condition for receiving a high school diploma. Alternatively, a certificate could be awarded and the high school diploma could serve its normal function of rewarding twelve years of perseverance with a credential. States could do either, or neither. The level of performance required on the test to get a cerificate or diploma could vary by state. However, as we will soon show, if the test actually measures agreed upon competencies, it will be difficult to vary the level of performance considered adequate. States and school districts might also use criterion referenced tests in the twelfth

grade to provide a kind of inventory of the abilities of all students at that level, at least to the extent of knowing how many pass the tests and the particular areas in which the others fail.

Clearly however the tests could not be used to evaluate teachers and class-rooms, or even schools. In which classes in which schools during 12 years of schooling did a child not learn to read? How can a teacher, a class, or a school, each of which is only a sequential component of a child's educational history, be faulted? In fact it looks as though one can only evalueate a sequence of feeder schools and the recipient high schools or a school district as a whole, and even this is suspect for three reasons:

1) All that can be evaluated is the number of twelfth graders who pass. There is no such thing as superior performance. One can, however, spot reasons for failure.

2) Low movement of children into and out of school districts is assumed; otherwise the test is not measuring the effort of just the district the child is in when taking the test.

3) No matter for what reason, children differ in their capacity to respond to the relatively fixed pedagogy of the American school. That there is a distinct and general pedagogy is clear.[15] Districts can differ greatly in the proportion of children who come into the school system fully prepared to learn best from this pedagogy. If one can evaluate little other than the student with the test, one cannot sanction any person or institution easily, except the student who fails, by using the test.

If the Federal government develops tests, there will be pressure to use them. Government has few ways to encourage uniform usage or penalize non-usage however. Title One funds could not easily be

withheld, for example. Title One as amended represents a compromised distributional benefit going to predominantly poorer areas to aid the education of low achievers. As such it has two ends - to help educate low achievers and, to that end, to supplement the rate of spending per child in districts with a less than adequate base for funding education. The distributional formula down to the district level based on the Orshansky poverty index has been amended several times (i.e. now including AFDC counts) so that the resulting distribution to states and districts provides adequate, attributable benefit to the congresspeople who need it. Congress is not going to upset this distribution.

Anyway, the Federal government probably does not need any sanctions. States and districts are under sufficient pressure from parents and taxpayers that they must do something about competency and accountability. Hence they will use criterion referenced tests to do both. States will likely respond to the carrot of money to help them in their own response to critics of current education. Some money will go for test development at the Federal level and some to states for implementation. Since most school districts give standardized norm referenced tests already, [16] the new tests may be substituted for those already in use. States and districts could obtain and use the tests with negligible increase in spending of their own money.

However, it is unclear that states can be required to use the tests in any particular way for purposes of giving students diplomas, certificates, for establishing state aid to school districts, etc. Any such requirement is constitutionally suspect even if attached to a carrot, and the carrot of test development itself is not enough to make an inflexible use of the test generally palatable. If the

states use the tests and can use them flexibly, most states would want to use different scores on the tests to determine competency. A principle reason for this is that no state is going to declare a large number of its children illiterate. A state will not even declare a large portion of a geographically or racially defined subset of its children illiterate. Certainly such children cannot be denied certificates or high school diplomas based on such test results without serious political consequences to those elected officials who allow it. Court challenges based on the equal protection clause and/or charging discrimination will follow and some will be successful. The adequacy of the test will be brought into question and challenged also.

The use of different standards by different states would be possible if any such test were a fifty to one hundred item exam scored in some customary way. One state might use 50% as passing; another 60% and so on. Probably testing professionals have this kind of test in mind. Yet, ironically, it is just such a test, a test constructed like most norm referenced tests but scored in absolute percentages that is most vulnerable to political and legal attack. Since different percentages are used, any particular percentage appears arbitrary, and established for political reasons. Of course, the use of tests is a political response to a political problem; however, the outcome of the measurement of competency must at least appear to be related to whatever competency is being measured and not to an acceptably low number of failures. It is unclear that any particular single percentage on such a test must be obtained in order for one to have a particular competency, unless the competency we are measuring is that of taking the test itself.[17]

In part, the competency we might really want to measure is taking various kinds of tests themselves. This would be responsive to some of the real reasons for the pressures for accountability. If part of the evidence given for kids not reading, etc., is their failure on tests or declining SAT averages, then we might deal directly with the evidence and not the issue. We can train kids to better take norm referenced tests. Interestingly, if we trained all children relevantly and competently the distribution of the results would be, in terms of norms, the same: the same kids would score low and would not get into professional schools.

If, however, we were to deal straightforwardly with the issue of the competency of say, high school graduates in some basic skills (again, it is unclear that this is what the critics really want) we would proceed quite differently. In testing for competency, we must first agree on those tasks and skills we want everybody to be competent at. Presumably such competencies involve many of the everyday acts and tasks involved in living in our complex society. Such tasks might include being able to read well enough to understand a medicine labeland a menu, to be able to add and subtract well enough to make change, to read a bus timetable, etc. The selection of such tasks is a strictly political process; that is, it involves stating what we should spend public money on in schools so that <u>everybody</u> can do certain things in life. Citizens, politicians, taxpayers, business people, all have a stake in this and should be involved in the process of making such a list. As certainly, professional testers, in their role as testers or test constructors <u>have absolutely no role</u>.

Once competencies are agreed upon one cannot even then automatically

go to test makers and ask how they are measured. The response of test producers to such questions in the past has been to offer a series of "indicators", most of which, in most tests, are unrelated to most activities in the world. The best way to measure competency at a task has been and always will be to bring the task into the test. Having decided on this, one can go to "experts" for help in the mechanics. The resultant test is likely to be a test with a short number of tasks to be performed. If one fails in even one task, one fails the test, because all the tasks are agreed to as being necessary to master. Clearly districts and states cannot then, vary the passing mark of any sensible criterion referenced test measuring minimal competencies. To do so would be like saying that one does not have to be able to read a train timetable in this state. On the other hand, if the test is not of this type, it is quite unclear if any educated competencies relevant to everyday life are being measured at all.[18]

If criterion referenced tests, either using criteria themselves or their known predictors, are introduced at several grade levels, each can be developed on the basis of "what should a (second), (sixth), (ninth), (twelfth) grader be able to do?" The tasks and activities that make up the answer to the question are then the base of each test. There is no necessary relationship among the tests except as we choose to make the activities and tasks cumulative. Further, there is no guarantee that all those who get pass a criterion based test at grade two will pass such a test at grade six: the development of competencies, even if taught, is not necessarily staged in the same sequence or acquired at the same rate across all students. Earlier tests will, of course, be somewhat predictive

of pass-fail results on later tests.

Consequences

The most likely consequence of Federal entry into any activity is a program, sometimes more than one. After test development and use, there will be the pressure to develop a program to train those who fail the test. Such a program would likely have two components:

1) training for those who fail criterion based tests in grade twelve. This training is presumably aimed at helping people pass the test.

2) training for those who are predicted as being likely to fail the test. Such predictions might be based on the criterion referenced tests given at earlier ages or other tests that would prove to be good predictors of the pass-fail distinction in twelfth grade. One can be sure that the makers and marketer of tests will quickly engage in efforts to develop tests that will accurately predict the pass-fail result of any test claiming to measure minimal competency in twelfth grade. This is true whether the twelfth grade test is one in which all questions must be answered correctly or one for which a percent correct is set. The same points held even if the reference of a test of minimum competency were to be, say, ninth or eleventh grade instead.

Any program to help either category of student is likely to be Federally funded. Again the principle of fiscal nonequivalence is important: spending is likely when the source funding is in general income tax revenues and the benefits are given out district by district and attributable to officials elected from those districts. States

and districts will be allocated funds on the basis of the number of seniors who fail the test. With this money states will require districts to set up programs to train in the tasks the test measures. The identity and number of particular individuals falling into this category in each district and state would be reasonably clear. Of course, funds allocation for this program will be modified in the Congress on the basis of a number of marginally relevant factors (e.g. local tax effort) until the distribution of funds is such that it will pass through the relevant area in the House and Senate.

Programs to help those who may not pass the test given in the twelfth grade will have a more complex etiology. Again, however, the basis of distributing program funds will be the political adequacy of the distribution itself. Various combinations of test results, justified in terms of helping the non-competent and those predicted to be non-competent will be tried. The result will be distributions to states and districts based upon educational need paralleling, not replacing, Title One distributions based on financial need.

The criterion referenced tests described in the preceding section are unlikely to be used as the basis of Federal distributions. Although the rhetoric surrounding such distributions will describe the basic competencies all Americans should have and will imply the use of the sort of test we outlined, in practice, tests must serve the needs of their makers and users. The Federal government must have a common standard or score across states and districts for the purpose of allocating money in a program to help those who may not pass a test at that level in twelfth grade. States must be able to vary that standard, so that inappropriate numbers and clusters of children are not incompetent or illiterate. Test makers know much

better how to make longer tests, one which every child makes at least a few mistakes. Indeed, the tests will be like entended norm referenced tests, except scored differently for different purposes: for purposes of meeting a standard performance, a percent is set; for purposes of prediction, the entire range of scores is used. Indeed one can simply rescore all the tests, including those given in twelfth grade as norm referenced tests. This is likely to be done, since most parents and teachers are more concerned with how well a particular student does, not whether minimum competencies are met. Most students do better than any reasonable set of minimum competencies that would be set for any grade level. Only norm referenced tests are of use to most educators. Students are tracked, go into advanced placement courses and get into various colleges in part on the basis of how well they perform on norm referenced tests. If the cost of selecting programs for students and the cost of selecting students for further educational opportunities is to be kept down, educators need these tests. So long as we are most concerned with the efficiency of choices made about students norm referenced testing will be used. Achievement tests will not disappear. While the rhetoric of the politics of educational evaluation leads to criterion referenced tests like those described in the last section, the actual politics involved is really the politics of selection and opportunity. Parents, even parents as tarpayers, want to know how well their kids are performing. This is not to be measured against some standard, but measured against other kids. The latter determines movement through the educational meritocracy and affects life chances. Hence, it seems inevitable that criterion referenced tests in actual use will look more and more like simply

normed referenced tests currently in use. The only other difference will be that there will be an initial and technically unsuccessful attempt to demonstrate that such tests and, particularly the cut-off points used, measure something in terms of competencies external to taking the test itself.

Federally funded remedial programs will also reflect the interests and advantages of major organized groups at all levels. Within the Federal bureacracy N.I.E. and O.E. are likely to attempt to gain control over major parts of the Federal effort. N.I.E. is a likely candidate to fund development of the regulated tests. O.E. might administer any testing program actually developed. In response to state and local pressures transmitted through the Congress, the rules for use of the money within districts are likely to be far less restrictive than Title One. While Title One is genuinely redistributive and has the full support of almost all state Title One officials, it is a very inflexible tool for responding to the political needs of people like district principals. This restrictiveness, particularly as it involves the schools in which money can be spent, is unlikely to obtain in the use of programs based on criterion referenced testing. Since all children take the tests, record-keeping at the local level can simply be accumulated at district and state levels. There will be some personnel required to do this and some auditors involved at all levels, but not as many per dollars or per student as in the case of Title One. There are still likely to be comparability and non-supplanting requirements, and those together with technical support will provide ample basis for expanding the mission and personnel of O.E.

Hence, it appears that the likely design of tests and programs

in response to cries for accountability in education will benefit or at least not harm most of the major groups involved in the processes of public education. Public bureaucracies, test constructors and taxpayers will benefit either really or symbolically. Teachers will not be harmed; evaluation of their contributions to basic education or of program contributions is almost impossible.

However, students who fail to pass the tests, particularly at the end of high school, are harmed. Regardless of their industry, their job prospects are seriously harmed. Chances in even the unskilled market for labor for individuals in this group diminish by an order of magnitude. In anticipation of this, dropouts increase. Programs to help students pass criterion referenced tests may help. We will spend the money for these programs so long as it comes from the Federal level and can be a distribution like Title One. Most of this money designed to educate those who fail will pass through the hands of and support a number of professions, professionals, and public bureaucracies. The programs become effectively a distribution to the middle classes, just like public housing and medicare.

Implications

A number of consequences follow from the use of any tests measuring basic skills and the implementation of programs facilitating the development of such skills. One will be increased specialization in elementary and secondary education, a specialization based on type of student taught rather than subject matter areas. Such specialization is the natural tendency of any profession, and will particularly occur in fields like education in which there may be

some question as to what set of specialized, trained and rare skills demarcate those who teach teachers from other educated people. Specialization by itself implies multiple competencies and also opens up multiple channels to success. The latter reduces competition costs in the field, a goal of every profession. When one adds children in these new programs to Title One eligible children, there is a vast pool of people to be "specially" taught in each of several subjects. This teaching is to be done at different levels in the program described in the preceding section. For example, there would be training for both those who fail tests and those much younger who might. Teaching different levels requires more differentiation of "special" skills.

The teaching of those who fail tests in twelfth grade will create a whole new business. While school districts may be required (with Federal funding) to set up programs to train those who fail, such programs do not guarantee their product. A new mini-industry would be created to fill the gap. The firms in this industry would provide such training and possibly charge differentially depending on whether the student passed or not. This could be a viable business. Further, the profit motive would provide marketplace pressure on the efficiency of instruction. Such pressure and evaluation is not provided in public sector programs with the thoroughness that occurs in the marketplace. Hence many of the private training institutions that will perform better (as measured by students who then pass) than will publicly funded programs in the school districts. Clearly, of those who could use such programs, the wealthy will buy into the private programs much more than the poor can or will. With this

income the firms could afford to hire away anyone who could actually teach pupils to pass these tests. These private programs would have a standing similiar to private, night law schools in the past. They will be tolerated if not encouraged, if only because of the relative political standing of the parents of the clients they predominantly serve. Indeed, we can fully expect veteran's benefits and other such programs to pay for such private training, given the importance of passing the test as a condition of employment and/or further education.

In any program to help those predicted not to attain minimum competency in some basic skills, the non-supplanting and comparability requirements are unlikely to be as stringent as those of Title One. One reason for this has already been mentioned: fluid funds and discretion are valuable localized political resources for district superintendents and principals, who make this well known to their representatives in Congress. A further argument certain to support local discretion involves economies of scale and economics of avoiding duplication. The shifting around of monies and altering of program size will be said to facilitate these economies. So far research in Title One demonstration districts shows no adverse impact of amount or quality of instruction the eligible student receives when this flexibility is used.[19] Title One is unlikely to become as flexible at the local level as most state and, particularly, local officials would like;[20] however, a new program like the ones considered here would likely be made more flexible for the obstensive purpose of making coordination with Title One and similiar programs possible.

Flexibility leads to efficient concentration of resources.

Remember, however, that efficiency is not judged in terms of some impersonal cost-benefit analysis, but in terms of the use of resource in ways responsive to the needs of the users. Some of these needs fall in the area of "response to evaluation".

While teachers and even schools cannot be evaluated in terms of their contribution to the development of minimum competency at basic skills, school districts can. Such comparisons are difficult to make across districts because of the varying characteristics of entering students, but if we assume that such variation is small within a district over a short span of years, measurement of improvement is possible. Districts have an incentive to get as many more people past tests of minimum competency as they can, given their resources. This means that districts will concentrate on these students who are predicted to almost pass. Such concentration is made possible by implicit tracing of students - the provision of different programs and teachers for the marginal cases and the hopeless cases. Certainly "experts" will judge the relevant materials and pedagogies to be different for the two groups. Concentration of funds is possible because there will be no requirement that certain amounts be spent on each student. Even Title One only requires a concentration of funding based on the <u>average</u> amount spent on a child in the program. The character of teacher-student interaction and expectations set for the students will be different in the two groups.[21] Within the profession of education this will create essentially three categories of specialization; one category involves the teaching of various skills to non-programs students; a second category involves the various specializations that teach basic skills to marginal students of varying ages; the third category is composed

of the child sitters for the hopeless cases.

As already noted, such increased differentiation of the profession serves the needs of educators not to be adversely evaluated. It increases the flexibility of the profession in responding to taxpayer concerns. To the extent that there is concern for the adequacy of education and to the extent that taxpayers can reward and punish the educational effort at the level of small and intermediate size school districts,[22] districts will concentrate on marginal, not "hopeless" students. Performance based on percents that pass tests will be maximized for a given budget. Much earlier than is now the case, students with real learning problems will simply be left behind.

For similiar reasons, the firms in the marketplace of instruction aimed at helping those who fail some test of minimum competency in basic skills in twelfth grade will concentrate on marginal cases, particularly if payment is based in part on later passing of the test. Profit is the motive, and with marginal as contrasted to hopeless students, income is maximized for given expenses per student.

The assessment of programs to help those who fail tests of minimum competency is presumably some measure of the number who later pass. However, students in different programs do not necessarily have the same distribution of backgrounds and other factors can affect success or failure at passing the tests. Hence other measures of success will be used as well. Among such measures will be simply the effective delivery of money to districts and services to students. This is consistent with the intended distributive impact of the programs. Indeed, Title One is valued this way.[23]

Also, like Title One, such programs are likely to have parent

advisory councils. Such councils advise little, but participation does thwart complaint. More importantly, PAC's serve as organized groups to which to communicate the fact that government (and its local representative) are spending money on programs relevant to them. Once the prominent direction of communication of information is clear, the logic of establishing such councils is overwhelming.

Oddly enough, the use of minimum tests of competency can have some pronounced effects on certain types of courses and materials totally divorced from any programs designed to bring about minimum competencies. Consider the wide variety of high school courses designed for students regardless of whether they are likely to go on to college or not. As currently taught, these courses can often be taken by students who are unlikely to pass minimum competency tests. Examples are nutrition, applied architecture, even shop. The demarcation of students into clear groups: pass, marginal, hopeless early in the educational process will lead courses to be more clearly labelled also. Among teachers of nutrition, for example, most would prefer not to be regarded as teachers of the hopeless. Most subfields of the education profession will begin to define their course content in terms of the groups for which it is intended to be suitable. Usually the courses would reflect pedagogies and materials best suited for the "pass" group. This is particularly true of subfields of doubtful academic stature. No subfield is going to say - we are a field or a type of course that should be taken predominantly by the hopeless or even the marginal students; there is no professional stature in this, so long as one is defined as a teacher of nutrition and not expressly as

one skilled in teaching the marginal - those who with the training and insight of the teacher may pass the tests of competency in basic skills later.

The division of students will have great consequences for the lives of some students. By sixth or seventh grade it is likely that students will be at least informally evaluated and grouped on the basis of tests as were English children by the old 11-plus exam. Further, the differences between groups will be exacerbated by the different curriculum offered by different groups. By the time twelfth grade tests are reached, the combination of sequential tests and different programs will have effectively divided the future labor force in three groups: 1) those who will continue to colleges and have a chance for training for entry into some professional guild or business, 2) those who are certified competent but not sufficiently competent relative to their peers to receive much additional training, and 3) those who are not certified competent. The former group will enter a labor market in which wages are predominantly negotiated; the other two groups enter a labor market in which employment at all and wages are determined more by supply and demand in the marketplace (with the buffer of the minimum wage.) The second group is differentiated from the third by a certification of competency, regardless of how arrived at. Formally the demarcation between two such groups was based on a high school diploma, which could usually be attained on persistence alone.

Clearly those without a certificate or diploma are disadvantaged in a labor market that almost always suffers from oversupply. Formally persistence alone would not move one into the first

category above, but could move one into the more favored group in the secondary labor market. One persisted to a diploma. However, if certification of minimum competency occurs, no amount of effort may be sufficient to move one out of the most disadvantaged category. Within this group unemployment will be very high and wages, when employed, low. Clearly the children of the wealthy who wind up in this category can often buy their way out through private training of the kind described. This leaves unemployed the poorer non-competents, disproportionally minority students. Almost all want jobs and some subset of this pool, who would have or do persist through high school, have that sort of perseverance and need for achievement that would make them excellent workers.[24] Likely though they will be ambitious, poor, and unemployed, a condition that attaches effort as well as sloth to the vicious cycle of poverty.

The cost of preparing and sifting candidates for the labor force is borne by the public purse. However, the benefits to business of even finer educational sifting than occurs at present is marginal at best. Businesses always look for ways to lower costs, including the cost of selecting personnel. To do this, they typically set barriers one must pass to be considered for a job (e.g. high school diploma). Up to a point, the finer the demarcation among potential employees, the greater the flexibility of businesses for setting those barriers that will produce not-too-large and not-to-small a flow of candidatesoverall and for each type of position. With minimum competency tests one can replace the high school graduate-non-graduate dichotomy with a four fold differentiation: graduate

with certificate, graduate without certificate, certificate without graduation, neither certificate nor graduation. This will have only a modest effect on the overall cost of personnel selection: however, in areas in which just those with both certificate and degree would be more numerous that the jobs available, costs to particular business will be lowered by the availability of more criteria which can be used to a priori limit elegible candidates. The effect is to lower the likelihood of employment of those who persist and work hard but do not get the certificate of competency. Further, the newly imposed barrier might easily be irrelevant to the job selected for. For very few jobs has anyone ever determined that a particular level of competency in basic skills is a necessary qualification; the competency in basics necessary for any particular job is not a matter of professional judgement but of empirical determination, which in almost all cases has not been done.

Finally consider the implication of successful programs. What should happen when everyone is minimally competent. Successful programs usually should put themselves out of business. When such programs involve Federal distributions which benefit many organized groups and are symbolically responsive to tax-payer and voter-complaints, they never go out of business. Additionally, professions will not wish to lose the use of public resources and public bureaucracies to lose part of their mission. Hence standards will be changed. The tests and programs will be with us a very long time, regardless.

Comments and Conclusion

If we look at the costs and benefits of introducing a sequence of criterion referenced tests of basic skills into American school systems, we can come to no overall conclusions. This is true of most other distributive activities of Federal and state governments also. The politics of education is not very different from the rest of politics. There is no neutral perspective from which we can say the use of such tests, welfare, or medicare is worth more or less than it costs. The costs and benefits are to different groups of people. We can say that such programs are more likely, if the funds spent are not easily traceable to individual taxpayers; that is, if there is a lack of equivalence in the tax base and the area of spending. In the case of the use of criterion referenced tests in schools, we identified likely scenarios including the development of a Federal program. Together the testing and the program present a particular package of benefits and costs to individuals and groups.

Those individuals who are not organized typically are unable to bear the time and cost of doing so around a new issue. Hence they bear the cost of testing and programs. Ironically (income, not property) taxpayers bear costs they do not see for developing the test and funding the program. A subset of students bears tremendous costs. These are the students willing to work, but unable to pass a test of basic skills. Further, once the testmakers are done with such a test, it may or may not measure any basic skill. On the other hand, professions in education will become more dif-

ferentiated; greater license will be given to tracking; warrants for considering education a set of professions will increase, test producers and professional academics will have new business; public bureaucracies will have new missions, politicians will have attributable benefits; private cost of employee selection goes down slightly ...; the list goes on. The advantages of prior organization around other purposes, usually related to business.[25]

The rhetoric surrounding this entire process, like all actions of governments and private groups is the rhetoric of the public interest. Politicians and educators can cite polls that indicate increased desire for competency based tests and accountability in general in the schools.[26] However, state and local education officials do not pressure for the substance accountability but for its forms instead. Tests of minimal competencies are one such form. This mechanism of bringing about accountability is said to be neutral and objective, to represent educational reform and to be brought about through the actions and products of expert public and private servants. Nonsense. The invocation of expertise, particularly unquestioned expertise only turns over problem solving to a subset of those who help create and perpetuate it. Just what are educators and test producers expert at that we are not when it comes to deciding what citizens should be educated to do and evaluating whether they are so educated? This question and this evaluation are inherently political, not technical questions. Further the invocation of reform suggests that there is a right answer to this question which all good people would come to if only politics could be gotten rid of. Reform only restructures the politics of education. Instead

of using party labels, we organize around competing values and group interests. The winners extract real or potential opportunity costs from the losers. In the present case organized groups within the educational process all gain. Unknowingly individual taxpayers and dramatically, some students, are the losers. Good business, reform politics, neutral and objective standards always benefit the well organized; this is particularly so for those who have already captured public authority to the end of regulating entry into their own group, determine the distribution of services, levels of payment, all justified in the name of protecting the public or mobilizing "expertise" and training for the public good.

The politics of proficiency, then, is twentieth century American politics as usual. Each group gets something of what it needs. Individuals lose. It begins with the politics of pressure - the pressure of dissatisfaction with the educational system, and particularly its cost. It moves through the politics of professions, balancing of the needs of various public bureaucracies and self-defined educational and professional guilds. Politicians themselves obtain attributable benefits which, when combined with the reciprocity system within most legislative bodies, is valuable for getting votes. The subsequent distributions support public bureaucracies and guild members. Maybe some children are helped; some surely are. Clearly some will be hurt. For them, effort and persistence will go unrewarded.

Footnotes

[1] In particular, H.R. 6038 and H.R. 7116.

[2] See "Statewide Minimum Pupil Proficiency Standards" by Robert Noonan and Larry Rubin, Rutgers University Study done under NIE Grant C-76-10105.

[3] Much of Western politics that is not directly concerned with elections, legislatures and the like. Instead politics is about the use of public authority, public law, and public funds to bear some private costs, convey some private benefit or allow some private, protected negotiation. In this aspect of the political process so many of us are members of various beneficiary groups that we fail to see just how much the public interest is composed of providing advantage to numerous parties. Indeed, even Federal bureaucracies often even organizationally mirror the distribution of diverse interests of their constituency. An outstanding example is the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A functional and/or geographically decentralized coupling of private interests, service oriented public bureaucracies, and active politicians in effective electoral arenas is found in every Western representative system. The functional field of education is like any other in this regard. The most detailed examination of this phenomenon in the U.S. is Grant McConnell, Private Power and American Democracy (Knopf. 1966.).

[4] These grants of public authority can include control over entry into a profession, the distribution of services offered, fee levels, policing of competency, control over training potential professionals, etc. We all can recognize these guild prerogatives as these of doctors, lawyers, professors, dentists, architects, social workers, and other guilds in varying degrees. In some Western systems, even private retailers and distributors are more like guild members. Entry is controlled by existing retailers and distributors in many sectors of the Swedish economy. New car dealerships in may states are similarly controlled by existing dealers. The establishment of many professional schools must usually be approved by professional societies. Failing control over entry, the retail and distribution units can attempt price maintenance through state fair-trade laws. Even educators' salaries go up when there is oversupply, exactly the opposite of what whould happen in a marketplace.

[5] It is quite unclear what a neutral-notion of the public interest would be. Partial views are held by almost everybody on some occasion. While genuinely held, these views are seen through the prisms of our interests, backgrounds and biases. On a systematic basis this has been labeled a "mobilization of bias," or natural restriction of agenda possibilities. See Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, "Two Faces of Power," APSR, LVI (Dec., 1962), pp. 947-952.

6 We are referring to the extensive system of reciprocity for attributable, electorally relevant benefits for which purpose the committee system, use of seniority, etc., are strictly instrumental. See Richard Bensel, untitled Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, Department of Government, 1977 and David Mayhew, Congress, The Electoral Connection (Yale University Press, 1976).

7 See Mancur Olson, The Logic of Collective Action (Harvard University Press, 1965) for a detailed exposition on why it is irrational for individuals to bear the cost of organizing and providing collectively usable goods or services. Olson's book also useful for explaining the low level of activity of most members of most already organized groups on even such a generally significant issue as standard setting and administration.

8 In general all organized groups use the cheapest available information that works at all when selecting members, employees, etc. Most selection devices like tests can be used even though they have little demonstrated, long run external criterion relevancy. They are not inversely relevant or perverse in their rankings. For example, among practicing accountants, there appears to be almost no association between any test scores (including I.Q.) and income or position. See critieques of the Jensen report in Harvard Educational Review reprints No. 2, 4. Further, organized groups will always externalize costs when possible. This is true for industrial waste product disposal and (relevant here) the cost of putting differentiating labels on kids. The latter cost is externalized to public education.

9 Parents already do this with their dollars. An infant industry has grown up around private attempts to increase the test scores of children whose parents can afford the training.

10 Among other reasons cited by the report are:
A. Television. Beginning in the early 1960's typical children had watched ten to fifteen thousand hours of T.V. by age 16.
B. Divorce rates. The effect of a divided family on academic achievement is assumed to be negative.
C. Lowered student motivation (need for achievement).
D. A decade of distraction.
E. Fewer required courses in high school - less insistence or training in areas SAT's test.
F. Increased school absenteeism, which is increasingly tolerated.
G. Grade inflation. A's do not stand for the quality of work they used to.

[11] Most designs were poor and could not have separated out ESEA effects from other factors influencing achievement. Further Title one is 30,000 programs, not one, same program repeated 30,000 times. To deal with it as one treatment effect in an experimental design is silly.

[12] See Educational Amendments of 1974 (Public Law 93-380) and Congressional Record October 4, 1966-October 6, 1966 pp. 25027-25581, parts. Clearly the distribution of money for educational purposes to poorer areas (those with a smaller per capita income base to support public education) was an important element in title one.

[13] Medicare, no matter who gets the service, pays the provider of the service, the doctor, at the going rate. There is no threat to professional control over wages, entry, and the distribution of service.

[14] Noone and Rubin, op. cit.

[15] This pedagogy involves knowing the relationship of wholes and parts, rules and the sequences ruler generate, and more generally the relations of classes. The class of birds falls properly with the class of animals, etc. Test such as the SAT's are implicitly based on these "manners of thought". Clearly verbal and mental experience in and familiarity with these manners of thought vary across socio-economic and racial groupings. Among other works see B. Bernstein and W. Brandis in C. Cazden, Child, Language and Education (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehard, Winston, 1972).

[16] The evaluational component of title one almost necessitates that such tests be given to at least title one students.

[17] The problem with most such tests is that they lack external criterion relevancy. Not only is there no particular percentage that can be shown to be necessary in order for a student to accomplish some other task, but students who score higher do not necessarily do the task better than those who soon lower.

[18] see 17.

[19] The consequences for students of many federal programs including title one often measured more in terms of services delivered rather than the consequences of the services. In the particular case of any single title one program, there has never been a properly designed quasi-experimental study of the effect of program or achievement test scores or the development of basic life skills.

[20] From state based data currently in analysis and write up it is clear that both local and state title one efficials want greater program and funding flexibility at the local level. At the same time these officials, particularly at the state level really view themselves as employees of title one and agree with and carry out their understanding of its educational mission.

[21] Little direct verification has been attempted. Data relevant at least by analogy is included in Ray Rist, "Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fullfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education HER reprint D-116.

[22] In large districts (e.g. New York City) there are too many political and bureaucratic intermediaries between taxpayers and school programs for taxpayers to feel efficacious or even actually effectively punish districts quickly. State and federal monies are also usually more important.

[23] See 19

[24] Leonard Goodwin Do the Poor Want to Work (Washington : The Brookings Institution, 1972).

[25] For example, see Joseph G. Weeres, "School Politics in Thirty Three of the Local Community Aras within the City of Chicago", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, U. of Chicago 1971

[26] George H. Gallup, "Ninth Annual Gallup Poll of the Publics Attitudes Toward the Public Schools", September, 1977.